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ABSTRACT

This ERIC Digest describes how experiential education can help in designing a curriculum that young people find significant. It also describes ways experiential education can help educators make the transition from a traditional program to an activity-based program. Experiential education differs from traditional education in that teachers first immerse students in action and then ask them to reflect on the experience. Several examples of experiential education involving different disciplines are described to illustrate the benefits of this approach. When experiential education is used, teachers and students must change their roles; both groups become active learners engaged in joint efforts. School organization may need to change in order to support an experiential approach. For example, an all-day time block may be used for certain activities. Adventure is one form of experiential education that is highly effective in developing team and group skills in both students and adults. Adventure activities help develop listening skills, recognize individual strengths, and promote mutual support. These benefits apply equally well to academic problem-solving or to schoolwide improvement efforts. Experiential education is an effective change strategy for schools and a more engaging way of treating academic content. It can also provide a model for helping all those involved in schooling become more comfortable with the unfamiliar roles associated with restructuring schools. (LP)

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Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools

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by Peggy Walker Stevens and Anthony Richards

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ERIC DIGEST

Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools March 1992

Changing Schools Through Experiential Education

by Peggy Walker Stevens and Anthony Richards

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IN ITS EFFORTS to restructure schools, the education community has begun to address the challenge of designing a curriculum that young people find *significant*. This Digest describes how experiential education can help provide such a curriculum and the impact it can have on students, teachers, administrators, and school organizational structures. It also describes ways experiential education can help educators make the transition from a traditional program to an activity-based program requiring the collaboration of teachers and students.

Description of Experiential Education

Experiential education is the process of actively engaging students in an experience that will have real consequences. Students make discoveries and experiment with knowledge themselves instead of hearing or reading about the experiences of others. Students also reflect on their experiences, thus developing new skills, new attitudes, and new theories or ways of thinking (Kraft & Sakofs, 1988).

John Dewey (1938) was an early promoter of the idea of learning through direct experience, by action and reflection. This type of learning differs from much traditional education in that teachers first immerse students in action and then ask them to reflect on the experience. In traditional classrooms, teachers begin by setting knowledge (including analysis and synthesis) before students. They hope students will later find ways to apply the knowledge in action. Despite the efforts of many would-be reformers, recent reports by researchers such as Goodlad (1984) and Sizer (1984) suggest that most teaching, particularly at the high school level, still involves the teacher as purveyor of knowledge and the student as passive recipient of it.

Some Examples of Experiential Education

Examples of experiential education abound in all disciplines. In her book, *Living Between the Lines* (1991), Lucy Calkins states,

> "If we asked our students for the highlight of their school careers, most would choose a time when they dedicated themselves to an endeavor of great importance . . . I am thinking of youngsters from P.S. 321, who have launched a save-the-tree campaign to prevent the oaks outside their school from being cut down. I am thinking of children who write the school newspaper, act in the school play, organize the playground building committee . . . . On projects such as these, youngsters will work before school, after school, during lunch. Our youngsters want to work hard on endeavors they deem significant."

There are other examples. High school English classes in Rabun Gap, Georgia have published the Foxfire books and magazines for over 25 years (Wigginton, 1985). Students research the culture of the Appalachian mountains through taped interviews and then write and edit articles based upon their interviews. Foxfire has inspired hundreds of similar cultural journalism projects around the country.

One widely adopted form of experiential education is learning through service to others (Kielsmeier & Willits, 1989). An example is Project OASES (Occupational and Academic Skills for the Employment of Students) in the Pittsburgh public schools. Eighth graders, identified as potential dropouts, spend three periods a day involved in renovating a homeless shelter as part of a service project carried out within their industrial arts class. Students in programs such as these learn enduring skills such as planning, communicating with a variety of age groups and types of people, and group decisionmaking. In carrying out their activities and in the reflection component afterward, they come to new insights and integrate diverse knowledge from fields such as English, political science, mathematics, and sociology.

Changes in Roles and Structures

Whether teachers employ experiential education in cultural journalism, service learning, environmental education, or more traditional school subjects, its key idea involves students taking on new active roles. Students participate in a real activity with real consequences.

Besides changing student roles, experiential education requires a change in the role of teachers. When students are active learners, their endeavors often take them outside the classroom walls. Because action precedes attempts to synthesize knowledge, teachers generally cannot plan a curriculum unit as a neat, predictable package. Teachers become active learners, too, experimenting together with their students, reflecting upon the learning activities they have designed, and responding to their students' reactions to the activities. In this way, teachers themselves become more active; they come to view themselves as more than just recipients of school district policy and curriculum decisions.

As students and teachers take on new roles, the traditional organizational structures of the school also may meet challenges. For example, at the Challenger Middle School in Colorado Springs, Colorado, service activities are an integral part of the academic program. Such nontraditional activities require teachers and administrators to look at traditional practices in new ways. For instance, they may consider reorganizing time blocks. They may also teach research methods by involving students in investigations of the

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community, rather than restricting research activities to the library (Rolzinski, 1990). At the University Heights Alternative School in the Bronx, the Project Adventure experiential learning program has led the faculty to adopt an all-day time block as an alternative to the traditional 45-minute periods. The faculty now organizes the curriculum by project instead of by separate disciplines.

Helping With the Transition

At first, these new roles and structures may seem unfamiliar and uncomfortable to both students and adults in the school. Traditionally, students have most often been rewarded for *competing* rather than *cooperating* with one another. Teachers are not often called upon for collaborative work either. Teaching has traditionally been an activity carried out in isolation from one's peers, behind closed doors. Principals, used to the traditional hierarchical structure of schools, often do not know how to help their teachers constitute self-managed work teams or how to help teachers coach students to work in cooperative teams. The techniques of experiential education can help students and staff adjust to teamwork, an important part of the process of reforming schools.

Adventure is one form of experiential education that is highly effective in developing team and group skills in both students and adults (Rohnke, 1989). Initially, groups work to solve problems that are unrelated to the problems in their actual school environment. For example, in an adventure course designed to build the skills required by teamwork, a faculty or student team might work together to get the entire group over a 12-foot wall or through an intricate web of rope. After each challenge in a series of this kind, the group looks at how it functioned as a team. Who took the leadership roles? Did the planning process help or hinder progress? Did people listen to one another in the group and use the strengths of all group members? Did everyone feel that the group was a supportive environment in which they felt comfortable making a contribution and taking risks?

The wall or web of rope becomes a metaphor for the classroom or school environment. While the problems and challenges of the classroom or school are different from the physical challenges of the adventure activity, many skills needed to respond successfully as a team are the same in both settings.

These skills—listening, recognizing each other's strengths, and supporting each other through difficulties—can apply equally well to academic problem-solving or to schoolwide improvement efforts. For example, the Kane School in Lawrence, Massachusetts, has been using adventure as a tool for school restructuring. The entire faculty—particularly the Faculty Advisory Council, which shares the decisionmaking responsibilities with the principal—has honed group skills through experiential education activities developed by Project Adventure. These skills include open communication, methods of conflict resolution, and mechanisms for decisionmaking (High Strides, 1990).

Summary

Experiential education can change schools because it requires new roles of students, teachers, and administrators. It can provide a different, more engaging way of treating academic content through the combination of action and reflection. Experiential education can also provide a process for helping all those involved in schooling become more comfortable with the unfamiliar roles commonly proposed for restructured schools.

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